

Comment

BUILDING ON WILLIAM MORRIS'S NEWS FROM NOWHERE

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For much of the 20th century people looking to transcend capitalism where they lived turned to news from somewhere else to inspire and guide them. Old habits die hard, as already seen in this century with the widespread fascination, and now disappointment, with Venezuela's 21st century socialism. Nor has the beacon of news from somewhere been confined to the revolutionary left; social democrats to this day still point lamely to old news from Scandinavia to sustain the politics of ameliorating capitalism. Socialists before 1917 had no such news from somewhere else to listen to. They could try to draw inspiration from the Chartists, or the 48ers, or the Communards, but they had no extant revolutionary social order to point to. That great advances were nevertheless made in drawing millions of people to socialism by the turn of the twentieth century shows that socialist persuasion does not have to rely on news from somewhere else. Very often it was the utopian sensibility – what Ernst Bloch later termed “the dream of the matter” present in architecture and art, literature and music as well as in political philosophy and socio-economic theory – which inspired the making of socialists.

Of course, the utopian sensibility's impact was greatest when it accompanied socialist political organization. One of the reasons William Morris's *News from Nowhere* stands out in utopian literature is because of its strategic sensibility to the development of the capacities to build the roads that would lead to the actual realization of the utopian sensibility. Morris's concern was not only to kindle popular desire for a future “pure Communism” modelled on preserving the best elements of England's own past. It was also to offer a persuasive account of “How the Change Came,” the longest chapter by far in *New from Nowhere* (well over twice of the length of any other). Morris imagines there that the key event that triggers the revolution takes place in 1952, as armed soldiers policing a state of siege in London turn on a large crowd of supporters of the Federation of the Combined Workingmen gathered in Trafalgar Square. Sixty-five years earlier, this was where Morris himself had actually spoken on London's infamous Bloody Sunday of November 13, 1887; and it was still very much on Morris's mind as he composed his great “utopian romance.” The time-traveller of *News from Nowhere* relates this long forgotten historical event to his interlocutor in the communist society of the future as one where “there was no fighting, merely unarmed and peaceable people attacked by ruffians armed

with bludgeons.” “And they put up with that?” he is asked. “We had to put up with it; we couldn’t help it,” he answers. To which, even more incredulity: “And is it really true that nothing came of it?” (Morris 1890, 42-43).

It is one of the great virtues of Michelle Weinroth and Paul Leduc Browne’s erudite and stimulating book, *To Build a Shadowy Isle of Bliss: William Morris’s Radicalism and Embodiment of Dreams*, that it demonstrates so clearly that Morris was soberly averse to impatient revolutionary adventurisms. Morris, like Marx, refused to foster illusions that anything other than a long slow process of organization and education would be involved in making socialism possible. In her previous outstanding book, *Reclaiming William Morris: Englishness, Sublimity and the Rhetoric of Dissent*, Michelle Weinroth addressed this precisely in terms of the inability of English revolutionary socialists to adequately capture and incorporate in their appeal the “creative nationalist dimension” that constantly informed Morris’s utopian and strategic sensibilities. This bears an especially poignant message now in the wake of Brexit, and more broadly amidst the widespread appeal of right-wing nationalism today amidst the contradictions of capitalist globalization. While Weinroth and Browne briefly reprise this argument in their conclusion to this new book, they are more concerned here with showcasing the originality of Morris’s “radically different radicalism” for the second half of the 19th century, albeit always with an eye to the importance of incorporating his legacy in any attempt to reimagine and renew socialism in the 21st century.

All the contributions to this admirable collection of original essays sustain Weinroth’s claim on the first page of the Introduction that “Morris’s practical and conceptual ability to unify the polarized spheres of art and politics is, even now, both subversive and unique” (Weinroth 2015, 1). They show in rich detail how Morris concretely demonstrated that “art and labour, commonly perceived as irreconcilable opposites, can be grasped in unison” (Weinroth 2015, 15). This could be seen in his own “joyful work” in the ornamentation of the everyday objects of life, incorporating traditional forms in such original ways as could not be dismissed as antiquarian. And it could be seen as well in how Morris carried this over to incorporating the English cultural inheritance into revolutionary political expression. This applied not only in how his socialist pamphlets were printed but how the “politically charged prosody and lyrical time” of his socialist chants were sung, creating “the aesthetic framework in which fellow activists (be they fictive or real) can channel their deep disquiet into collective possibility” (Weinroth 2015, 25-6).

Morris’s profound understanding of the importance of connecting what we do in the present to the retrieval of past expressions of collective possibility and their projection into the future was what allowed him to bring utopian and strategic sensibilities together so creatively in *News from Nowhere*. As Weinroth explains (2015, 29-30), Morris personally experienced anarchist tendencies to engage in “a facile but perilous

'propaganda of the deed' [which] ignored the veritable complexities of societal transformation"; this informed his attempt to dramatize in *News from Nowhere* "the strenuous labour of delivering socialist news." And insofar as the "bridge" to communism would be a process of revolutionary transformation consisting primarily for Morris in education, in "making socialists," the key question for him was who would be educating whom to socialism, and how. The answer he gives in the "How the Change Came" chapter of *News from Nowhere* is that this involved a slow process of working-class institution-building, stretching over half a century and culminating in the Federation of Combined Workmen. What made revolutionary transformation possible by 1952 was that the confrontation in Trafalgar Square was preceded by "a long series of years during which the workmen had learned to despise their rulers, had done away with their dependence on them." And this was "leavened [...] by actual contact with declared Socialists, many or indeed most of whom, were members of those bodies of workmen above said" (Morris 1890, 125).

News from Nowhere's picture of what Morris called a "piecemeal State Socialism" which was "partly put in motion" by way of "ameliorating the capitalist system" while leaving "wage slavery in place" was astonishingly prescient for its close resemblance to what the 1945 Labour government actually effected in the years immediately before 1952. And it was no less prescient for foreseeing how "it did not work smoothly; it was, of course resisted at every turn by the capitalists, and no wonder for it tended more and more to upset the commercial system [...] The result was growing confusion, great suffering among the working classes, and, as a consequence great discontent. For a long time matters went on like this" (Morris 1890, 105-106). Indeed, and 65 years after 1952 they still go on like this.

There is unfortunately little discussion in Weinroth's and Browne's book of what was done and what might yet be done along the lines that Morris envisaged by way of working-class institution-building and mass socialist political education. Browne's own chapter kindly quotes from something I wrote a few years ago, pointing to the enormous amount of writing that has continued to be produced about what a future socialism would look like, but also pointing to the failure of these writings to tell us "how the hell would we get there. What are the vehicles? What are the agencies? How are the vehicles connected to the agencies?" But apart from sustaining Morris's own view that this will involve "a long period of half-formed aspirations, abortive schemes, and half measures" (Morris 1888-1890, 57), Browne himself has very little to say in answer to these questions. And while Tony Pinkney's drawing on the science fiction of Ursula Le Guin and Kim Stanley Robinson to imagine what a sequel to *News from Nowhere* would consist of today is both inspired and insightful, he concentrates much more on the contradictions and cock-ups that would beset future communist societies than on what it would take to develop the vehicles and agencies that would get us beyond capitalism. After tantalizingly

insisting that “if the revolution is indeed renewed in another Trafalgar Square confrontation, we should not model this in Leninist terms, as with those epic scenes of crowds storming the Winter Palace” but rather on “political tents in Trafalgar Square, as the Occupy movement so admirably demonstrated in late 2011 in Zuccotti Park,” he only leaves us with the observation that the subsequent dispersion of the Occupy movement shows “how difficult it is to sustain and generalize such non-conventional radical practices” (Pinkney 2015, 238).

Given the widespread turn by activists from protest to politics in recent years in the wake of Occupy, as seen in the rise of Syriza and Podemos as new parties, and the insurgencies represented by Corbyn and Saunders in old ones, which in some ways parallels Morris’s disenchantment with the anarchist tendencies of his own time, one wishes that a more central concern of Weinroth’s and Browne’s new book on Morris’s legacy would have been with what we can learn today from his own fraught experiences in actually building socialist political organizations. It is much to be hoped that it will provide the occasion for socialists not only to reflect on what happened to the revolution that was made in Russia in 1917, but also on why the revolution that Morris foresaw in England a half century ago was *not* made in 1952, and on what we might take from Morris to try to build the socialist political organizations necessary to still try to get such a revolution made. Say sixty-five years from now, around 2082?

References

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